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ABSTRACT

This testimony presented before the United States Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and Humanities presents an expert's conclusions about the status of reading in the United States. It points to several studies comparing reading achievement scores of students today to scores of students of several years ago: discusses data that are used to argue that children today do not read as well as those in the past, especially looking at the declines of scores on the "Scholastic Aptitude Test": and presents four recommendations for the government's role in improving reading education. It suggests that while there is room for improvement in reading education, statistics that seem to indicate that students are reading less well than students of an earlier day need to be carefully examined. (TJ)

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The Teaching and Learning of Basic Academic Skills in Schools

A Testimony Before the Senate Subcommittee on Education, Arts, and Humanities

Testimony of Roger Farr, President of the International Reading Association, Professor of Education at Indiana University, and co-author of *Teaching a Child to Read*, before Thomas F. Eagleton's Senate Subcommittee, April 9, 1979

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Mr. Chairman:

I appreciate the opportunity to testify before this subcommittee. My entire career has been in education. I have been an elementary teacher, a high school English teacher, and a university professor. I have always been deeply interested in reading achievement and reading instruction and have been a school reading consultant and director of two reading clinics. For the past fifteen years, my research efforts have focused on literacy, measurement, and reading achievement trends.

I am presently Director of the Henry Lester Smith Research Center and the Reading Research Center at the Indiana University School of Education. I have also been Associate Dean for Research and Research Training at Indiana University. For the past twelve years, I have been coeditor of the *Reading Research Quarterly*, which is one of the most widely circulated research journals in the field of education.

This year I am vice-president of the International Reading Association, which has over 65,000 members in seventy-nine countries. Next year I will serve as president of the association, which includes teacher educators, classroom teachers, researchers, education students, and parents interested in reading and related fields.

I am the author of *Reading: What Can Be Measured?*, the *Iowa Silent Reading Tests*, and the reading section of the *Metropolitan Achievement Tests*. I am coauthor of a new elementary reading methods text entitled *Teaching a Child to Read* and of the Laidlaw basal reading series.

During these experiences, I have been involved in three projects which I believe are so pertinent to the investigation of this subcommittee that I would like to call specific attention to them. I am coauthor of a study which compiled and reviewed all the literature

available on reading achievement in the United States up to its publication in 1974. It is entitled *Reading Achievement in the United States: Then and Now.* In addition, I am coauthor of a study which compared the reading achievement of Indiana sixth and tenth graders in 1976 to that of those from 1944–45. *Then and Now: Reading Achievement in Indiana (1944–45 and 1976)* was published in 1978. I submit copies of these two studies to the subcommittee as supporting data for my testimony today. Also, as the author of two national reading tests, I have studied and reviewed the extensive data from their tryouts and standardization.

Today I would like to present eight conclusions that my research and experience recommend about the status of reading in this country. Then I will discuss two major issues that support and help explain the conclusions. The first of these issues concerns extant studies which have been relatively overlooked in the national debate about reading achievement and which contradict the notion that today's students do not read as well as those from the past. The second issue tends to explain how—without ready access to such data—the country has come to believe that children are not learning to read. This national belief in what I consider to be a myth is partially based on misuse and misinterpretation of data that are used to support that negative notion. Finally, I would like to make some recommendations for federal involvement in the development of trends data and of more effective reading education.

Here, then, are my conclusions about the status of reading in the United States:

1. If basic literacy is defined as the ability to read at a certain minimal level—for example, at a second grade level—then close to 100 percent of the citizens of the United States are literate. Persons who cannot read at this minimal level are those who are hindered by physiological and psychological handicaps.

2. America is a nation of readers.

3. Literacy demands have consistently increased in America. The

requirements for reading in order to function successfully on the job are definitely higher now than they have been in the past.

4. The trend has been for a consistent increase in reading achievement at all grade levels since the time that test data information in the United States was first recorded.

5. The fluctuations in reading achievement data that have been observed can be traced to such factors as changing promotion policies of schools, the move toward open enrollment policies, an increased emphasis on encouraging minority populations to seek more education, and a definite reduction in school dropouts. While these fluctuations may have made it seem that a change in reading achievement was occurring, what was occurring, in fact, was a change in the composition of the population taking the tests.

6. The measured increases in reading achievement throughout the nation have been most pronounced at the youngest age levels. This is perhaps due to parental attitudes about education, the influence of television, and selected preschool and primary programs.

7. The most serious reading problems are directly related to low socioeconomic status.

8. There may be a growing trend to overemphasize the teaching of isolated reading skills at the loss of the development of higher levels of comprehension.

There are several important studies which help explain and contribute support to my conclusions about reading in the United States:

1. One of the most carefully conducted studies indicates conclusively that reading ability has not deteriorated during the 1970s. This extensive study of reading ability in the United States was conducted by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. This was the first major attempt to gather information on a nationwide basis about the learning trends of American schoolchildren

and adults. A random sample of 63,000 nine-, thirteen-, and seventeen-year-olds was tested in 1971 and again in 1975 on literal and inferential comprehension and on reference skills.

The nine-year-olds in 1975 read significantly better on all three measures than did nine-year-olds four years earlier, and black nine-year-olds improved even more dramatically than did that age group as a whole. There was little change over the four-year period in the reading ability of the thirteen- and seventeen-year-olds, although both groups showed a slight improvement in literal comprehension. The seventeen-year-olds also improved on the reference skill items.

To measure functional literacy skills, the NAEP test for seventeen-year-olds incorporated items which represented typical printed formats encountered in today's society and which called for typical reading behaviors. The representative sample of seventeen-year-old students in the nation who were administered this test showed an average gain of over two percentage points between 1971 and 1975. Black students exhibited an even greater gain of five percentage points.

2. The 1976 Indiana study shows that today's children read at least as well as and probably better than students their age thirty years ago. This study compared the reading achievement of sixth and tenth graders in the state in 1944–45 to that of children in the same grades in 1976 by testing thousands of students. The same edition of the *Iowa Silent Reading Tests* was administered both times. When the grade equivalent scores only are considered, the students in 1976 scored about the same overall as they did thirty years earlier. However, the 1944–45 sixth grade students were found to be approximately ten months older than their 1976 counterparts, and the 1944–45 tenth graders were found to be fourteen months older than the 1976 tenth graders. When the scores were adjusted for these age differences, the 1976 sixth graders outscored their earlier counterparts significantly on every subskill measured and on total score. The adjusted scores of the 1976 tenth graders were also significantly higher than those of the

1944–45 students on all subtests except one. Both sophomore groups performed the same on the paragraph comprehension subtest. The major conclusion of the Indiana study was that the reading achievements of the 1976 students were markedly improved over those of the 1944–45 students when the age differences are taken into consideration. Another conclusion suggested that the contention that today's students do not read as well as those from the past may be a dismal myth.

3. Contrary to popular opinion, American students compare quite favorably to students from other countries throughout the world. The results of a 1977 study showed the top 9 percent of the twelfth graders in the United States performed better on a test of reading comprehension than did comparable students elsewhere. That is, they outperformed students in their last year of secondary school in fifteen other countries.

   One may ask, "Only 9 percent?" But there are important factors that must be considered when cross-cultural comparisons are made. For example, the United States advocates an educational program that is available to everyone—unlike many other countries, where it is determined very early in a student's educational life whether he or she is qualified to attend secondary school at all. Over 75 percent of the twelfth grade age population in the United States was enrolled in school in 1977, while the other fourteen countries had a median percentage enrollment of 17 percent; thus that 9 percent who outperformed their counterparts from other countries achieves significance.

4. Sixth graders in one Ohio community are also reading better than students in the past. In a study there, a paragraph comprehension test that had been administered to sixth graders in 1917 was given to 183 sixth graders in 1978. When the test results were compared, the 1978 students performed significantly better than the 1917 students in both literal and inferential comprehension.

5. Even the critics of reading achievement acknowledge the increase in scores on reading tests for children from the lower elementary

grades. Let me cite two studies which exemplify this. Information is available from the testing program in Iowa, where the *Iowa Tests of Basic Skills* (ITBS) have been used in most school systems since the 1940s. When students in 1940 and 1965 were compared, the reading test performances of the students in 1965 were dramatically better. Since 1965, the median performance in reading for Iowa third graders has continued to rise. In fact, the median third grade reading performance in 1977 was about six months higher than the median twenty-two years earlier. This indicates that the children in the primary grades in Iowa are learning to read just as well as—even better than—those in the past.

The *Comprehensive Tests of Basic Skills*, used widely throughout the nation, also provides positive information about reading in the primary grades. The norm data from 1968 and 1973 for grades 2, 3, and 4 show small increases in the reading achievement scores. These increases were also apparent for grades 2 and 4 on the language and mathematics subtests and for grade 3 on the mathematics subtest.

6. Our personal observation should suggest that books, magazines, and other published materials are more available in the United States today than in any other society man has known. Titles are stocked and displayed by the hundreds in drugstores and supermarkets, as well as in book stores. A study conducted for the Book Industry Study Group Incorporated concludes that "Americans can accurately be described as a nation of readers." A representative sample of the United States population age sixteen and over was studied to determine their book-buying and reading habits and motivations. According to the survey, 55 percent of the population had read at least one book in the six months preceding the study; and these people also read magazines and/or newspapers. Of these book readers, 45 percent had read more than ten books during that period. Another 39 percent of the total population sampled read magazines and newspapers rather than books. Only 6 percent read nothing.

A review of another set of studies endorses the claim that we are a

nation of readers. Robert A. Ellis studied readership surveys from the early 1970s to determine the state of American reading habits and skills. This study found that over 90 percent of Americans read some type of English-language publication—newspaper, magazine, or book—with some frequency. The 5 percent who were described in the studies as nonreaders were usually characterized as being visually handicapped or readers of foreign languages.

Examination of the survey data indicates that reading habits are established very early in life. Two major influences are parents' habits and interests and successful experiences in the beginning school years. Children whose parents read to them were found to be better readers and exhibited a greater interest in books than children whose parents did not read to them; children who experienced success during their first few years in school developed into readers.

7. An analysis of the data collected in several surveys on functional literacy, including the Harris studies, does not support claims that schools of today are less effective than the schools of yesterday. This 1978 analysis by Fisher for the National Institute of Education concluded that our schools—elementary and secondary—are more effective than ever in increasing literacy throughout the United States. A 1978 review of national census literacy data shows how this uneven information clearly indicates that we have virtually eliminated illiteracy in this country.

The second general issue I would discuss deals with the inappropriateness and misuse of data which are used to argue that our children today do not read as well as those in the past. The kinds of data I have been summarizing have not been widely disseminated, partially because some elements of our mass media—particularly the electronic media—have not seen fit to incorporate it when reporting on or analyzing national literacy issues. Part of this problem arises because the most appropriate data—or the researchers who have collected or created it—have not had the audience appeal of numerous critics of education with their doomsday data.

I believe it is important that this subcommittee understand how the misuse of data—particularly test scores—relates to what the public believes about reading achievement.

Among the data sources that have been used to launch national panic about reading education are the score declines noted on the *Scholastic Achievement Tests* from the mid-1960s up until recent years, when they leveled off. These declines are a serious matter and have been the subject of extensive study. The commission headed by Willard Wirtz noted that our national commitment to equal opportunity in education resulted in an increasingly broader range of abilities among the high school seniors and juniors taking the test over the years that the scores dropped. The Wirtz Commission also noted that the social and political turbulence during the years of the SAT score decline led high school seniors and juniors to take tests such as the SAT much less seriously than students before them had.

Even without these qualifications, the SAT scores are not a valid assessment of reading achievement in our schools. They measure a very high level of comprehension and are, therefore, not a measure of functional literacy. They are administered to only high school seniors and juniors and are, therefore, no measure of the other ten grades. They are, in fact, administered to only juniors and seniors who are college-bound and do not, therefore, even represent the total population of those two grades. To extend interpretations of scores on such tests as the SAT in order to attack reading education across the board is a gross misuse of such tests, as well as a patently invalid argument.

Another general misuse of data which is prevalent among critics of education might be described as the inappropriate combining of different data in order to draw a single conclusion. The scarcity of reliable data which have been identified, synthesized, and carefully interpreted makes the inclination to combine different data somewhat understandable, but not defensible.

It is a misuse of tests to compare the scores of different populations or the same populations on different tests. Different tests are written with different emphases and at different levels. One test, for example,

may emphasize phonics, and another may emphasize structural analysis. A large proportion of still others may be made up of comprehension questions, and the type and degree of comprehension tested may vary greatly from test to test. Some critics combine test data on computation achievement with that on reading achievement and add selective critical comments to draw a general negative conclusion. Unfortunately, this unscientific approach sweeps logic away before it and has had considerable unwarranted impact on the public.

Comparing reading achievement scores over time is difficult when the study is highly controlled. If you use the same test today that was used twenty years ago, you need to examine the test for any value questions which would be valid for the early populations but not for the later. And if you do the comparison in one area—a large city, for example—you must be sure that the social and economic nature of the school population in that urban area has not changed significantly. The aim, of course, is to compare as broad a population as possible while stratifying and controlling the balance of the samples.

One type of data frequently used by critics might be called "anecdotal." I believe strongly in the validity of information that we can garner from interviews. I listen carefully to the hundreds of educators I meet in my professional experience. But I am aware that for such data to be viable, the interviews need to be numerous and random—yet controlled to represent significant factors in the population. And they should be substantiated by other types of data. One has to be suspicious when CBS, for example, presents several very critical parent and teacher interviews as representative of the whole nation and offers no explanation or statistics as to how these comments validly represent the population.

Anyone can select interviews to support any argument; and while it might be informational for me to tell you that my experience talking to educators suggests this or that about the effectiveness of reading education, it would be foolhardy to accept my anecdotes as hard data that recommend specific decisions. Yet as a nation that is what we appear to be doing: we are demanding "a return to the basics" without knowing exactly what we mean by the basics in terms of reading skills

and subskills or content control. We do not even have a nationally accepted definition of functional literacy. We are rushing into minimum competency testing with that same lack of understanding. More importantly, we do not have scientific assurance that we ever have been far enough away from the basics to permit us to go back to them.

I would not want this subcommittee to conclude that I believe there is no room for improvement in reading education. I am fully committed to helping make reading education ever more effective. And I believe that the federal government has an important role to play in this effort —both by helping to clarify the present status of reading achievement in the United States so that fully informed educational decisions can be made and by supporting research and experimentation related to reading instruction. Therefore, I would like to make the following four recommendations:

1. The federal government should designate adequate funds that can be used to collect and to generate reliable and valid reading trend data and related contextual data. This is not presently the case. For example, some of the important funding for National Assessment of Educational Progress has been cut. Because of this, some of the comparisons that were originally planned and for which 1971 data was collected (that of young adults) were eliminated.

   In addition to the highly dependable research done by the NAEP, we need efforts to pull together and analyze valuable pools of extant trend information. For example, there are cities and states with trend data, and the military and the publishing industry have extant information that should be pulled into a central analysis of the status of reading in the nation. Beyond this, there is performance data available on large populations from earlier periods that would provide trend data if carefully matched with contemporary samples.

   It is also important that such quantitative achievement data should be put into proper perspective. Test scores in and of themselves cannot provide complete understanding. It is imperative that re-

lated social, economic, and educational factors be studied through qualitative methods such as interviewing and content analysis of written records. The federal government should provide adequate funding so that this important contextual information can also be collected and analyzed in relation to the achievement data.

2. The federal government should become actively involved in the dissemination of information regarding national reading trends. Particular care should be given in order to project an accurate picture of the status of literacy. If reliable data indicate Americans are reading better than in the past, that news should be disseminated with the same intensity as that dictated by the urgency suggested by a decline. This public information effort should focus not only on score and related contextual data that have been acquired, but on other information that helps provide a balanced picture. This effort would include data that assess real national goals, such as our dual commitment to democratic as well as high quality educational opportunities. Such data would reveal trends in the number of Americans being educated and the number being graduated.

   Increased federal funding would be channeled to NAEP and NIE as well as to the Office of Education so that complete literacy information can be disseminated. Dissemination efforts would also be a major role of a Reading Trends Commission. The International Reading Association and the National Education Association are presently exploring the establishment of such a commission to aid in the identification, collection, and synthesis of reading trend information and to lend credence to its dissemination.

3. The federal government should encourage and fund additional educational research efforts that are directed toward the solution of known problem areas in reading education. It is a well-established fact that children from low socioeconomic background are more apt to experience reading difficulties than children from middle or high socioeconomic backgrounds. We need to continue to expend resources to develop reading methods, materials, and programs that can be used more effectively with such populations, taking into

account that children with low SES are not all endowed with the same attributes. Thus, a child from one locality with a low socioeconomic background can differ extensively from a child with low SES in another locality. Because of this, their needs—and consequently the appropriate instructional methodology and materials to be used—will differ.

4. The federal government should contribute to the improvement of teacher education by increasing its funding of short-term experimental preservice and inservice training. I would not have this recommendation misquoted to suggest that I am recommending federal long-term support for such programs that are ongoing; thus I reemphasize the short-term and experimental nature of the training I am recommending. I believe that the role of the teacher in reading education is the key to improved instruction. Yet the average secondary content teacher will take less than one semester of courses in professional education preparatory to beginning teaching, and there is no guarantee that any one course will deal with reading methodologies. Teacher education programs that incorporate a fifth year of intern teaching or differentiated staffing or increased field experiences in schools should be encouraged. Government funds can be of vital assistance to school systems and education institutions in upgrading the preparation of reading teachers by promoting the development of better courses.

I sincerely appreciate this opportunity to offer the subcommittee my conclusions about reading in the United States, a review of studies I believe are valid indicators of its status, my concern about the misuse of data in determining that status, and some recommendations that I believe could improve the impact of the federal government in its concern for reading as a basic skill.

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